

Listen well: Prevent earwax buildup



IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL

By **TEDDY JONES, R.N., C.S., PH.D., FAMILY NURSE PRACTITIONER**

IMAGINE the sound that a single ripe kernel of corn would make if it dropped a distance of about 5 inches into a metal basin holding an inch of water. Somewhere between a “plink” and a tiny “splash.”

Which of those sounds the patient heard probably depended on how much water remained in his ear. But from the expression on his face, it was evident that he had heard something, and he was happy about that.

As I began his exam, he'd mentioned apologetically that his ears were probably not clean.

“I tried getting 'em clean with a Q-tip, but I doubt if I did a good job,” he said.

He had come to the clinic for a general checkup in order to get refill prescriptions for his hypertension and not for hearing problems.

Standing slightly behind his right ear, I said softly: “Have you had any trouble hearing recently?”

“Huh?” he replied.

Key Points

- Impacted cerumen, or earwax, is a common problem.
- Earwax buildup can be prevented using simple methods.
- Unless it's your hearing aid, never put anything into your ear canal.

I began his exam by peering into his ears. Whether or not someone has complained of ear trouble, taking a peek at a patient's ears is a good way to observe several things: ear canals and eardrums, skin of the head and neck, odors, and general hygiene.

I could not see either eardrum.

No wonder he couldn't hear my whisper. Cerumen occluded the entire ear canal. Few, if any, sound waves could penetrate the cerumen, or earwax, to vibrate the eardrum and transmit sounds.

Ear irrigation

After completing the physical, I told him that we could help him hear better if he would let us irrigate his ears. Farmer thought he was, “irrigation” seemed like a good idea to him.

The “plink” sound occurred when a hard, dry, corn-kernel-sized piece of wax washed out of his ear into the catch basin below.

The procedure was uncomplicated and relatively quick; his hearing improved.

End of the story? Not for me. Prevention is “always on my mind” (to borrow a song title from Willie Nelson).

I'll tell you what I explained to that farmer. It could help you, too.

Cerumen impaction is the diagnostic term for an ear canal plugged with wax. This buildup occurs when a person's body forms a lot of wax.

Some folks just make more wax than others, and something prevents the normal dry flaking that can be cleared away with a swipe of a washcloth.

Don't get pushy

Cerumen impaction can occur at any age. A complicating factor is that often in an effort to clean wax from the ear using a cotton-tipped swab, a person pushes the obstruction farther into the canal.

Another potential cause for such a blockage is an in-the-ear hearing aid that blocks the natural exit of bits of wax.

And yet another factor is a dry climate that dehydrates the wax. It hardens, sticks to the tiny hairs in the canal and becomes that “kernel.”

Besides reducing hearing acuity, cerumen impaction also can create odd, annoying sounds as the person moves

his or her head, or a feeling of fullness or soreness of the affected ear. An adult usually can identify that something is not right, but a child may only tug at the ear or not seem to hear.

The irrigation remedy is usually effective, as can be the use of a blunt curette to loosen the material so that it can be irrigated out.

But the easiest course is to prevent buildup. An inexpensive method is to insert two to three drops of a mixture of equal parts of 3% hydrogen peroxide and water into each ear two to three times a week.

After a few minutes, wash the external ear using a washcloth over your smallest finger.

Do not put a cotton swab into the canal; never probe into the ear canal with anything.

There are other ways to soften earwax, but commercial products cost more.

Any method used regularly will prevent the impaction that can be uncomfortable and annoying, and impair hearing.

The preventive steps can save you the trouble and expense of a visit to a health care provider.

Jones is professor emeritus in the School of Nursing, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center at Lubbock, Texas.

Pork tacos with a Latin flair

SPRING has arrived at last, and it's time to celebrate the season. Whether it's a simple family meal or a weekend gathering, add some Latin flair that everyone will remember with Velveted Pork Tacos.

Pork is a mainstay in traditional Hispanic cooking, as well as being versatile and easy to work with. Velveted Pork Tacos are inspired by Mexican street-food fare, which is easy to prepare.

Don't be afraid to get creative with your side dishes, too. Try grilled corn on the cob served with chipotle butter or black beans garnished with cilantro.

View more time-saving recipes with Latin flair at www.theotherwhitemeat.com.



Velveted Pork Tacos

- 2 pounds boneless pork chops
- 1/3 cup cornstarch
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 1/2 tablespoons ground cumin
- 1 package of 12 flour tortillas (“fajita” or smaller-sized tortillas)
- 1 small can of corn niblets
- 1 jar tomato salsa
- 1 small container sour cream (regular or nonfat)
- 1 8-ounce package shredded cheese
- Salt and pepper

Cilantro Red Onion Salad

- 1 bunch fresh cilantro
- 1 red onion
- 1 tablespoon white vinegar
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Dash black pepper

Cut pork chops into small, bite-sized pieces. In a bowl, mix together cornstarch, oil, cumin and 1 teaspoon black pepper until a smooth paste. Add pork and marinate for 30 minutes.

While pork marinates, wash cilantro and pluck whole leaves from stems, about 3/4 cup worth. Place whole cilantro leaves in a bowl. Thinly slice red onion and add to cilantro, creating a salad. (You can adjust cilantro and red onion ratio to taste.) Add a dash of black pepper, white vinegar and 1 tablespoon of olive oil; toss to coat and set aside.

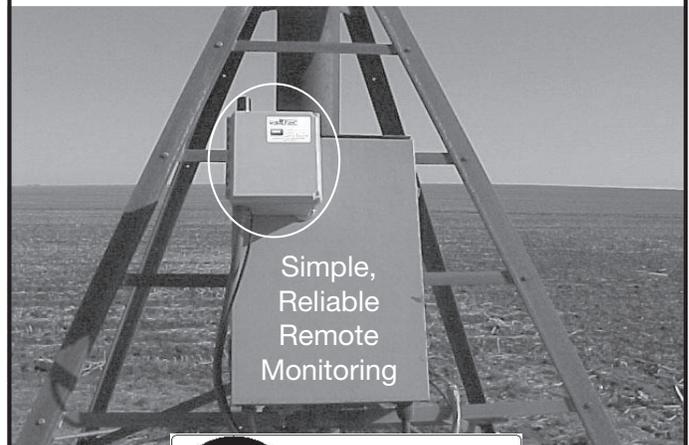
Cook marinated pork in batches.

Add a teaspoon of olive oil to a nonstick sauté pan and place over medium-high heat. When oil comes to temperature, cook half the pork pieces (without removing the marinade). Cook until the outside of the pork pieces is brown and a crust has formed and the inside is cooked through, about five minutes per side. If needed, add more oil to the pan, and then cook the second half of the marinated pork. Once finished, sprinkle cooked pork with salt to taste.

To assemble tacos, warm tortillas according to directions on the package. Take one tortilla and smear a teaspoon of sour cream down the middle. Top with seven to eight chunks of pork. Atop pork, place a spoonful of salsa, then top with cilantro red onion salad, a teaspoon of corn kernels and pinch of cheese. Makes six servings, or 12 tacos.

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